



DIY SOFTWARE

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Whether you're the sort of person who hedges the simplest of home improvement tasks or a DIY expert, your PC can help you plan jobs around the house and improve your skills, as Mike Bedford explains

According to research carried out by the Alliance and Leicester bank last year, Britons spend an average of £1,200 on home improvements every three months. However, that money isn't always well spent. From drilling through water pipes to demolishing a load-bearing wall without first propping up the floor above, inept DIYers have proved that working on your house isn't always easy. And it gets worse. According to the DTI, a quarter of a million people are treated in hospital each week because of DIY-related accidents. Clearly it helps to know what you're doing, and that's where our guide to home improvement software and websites comes in.

As with most jobs, one of the keys to a successful DIY project is planning. This will let you know what you need and eliminate any nasty surprises by seeing what things will look like before you start. To help you here we have a variety of packages ranging from kitchen design software to programs for designing a new home.

Planning is of little value without some basic knowledge, so to prepare you for jobs such as plumbing, plastering and painting, we've selected a couple of packages that aim to teach you these skills. The web is also a rich source of information, so we've reviewed a handful of interesting websites below.

It's possible that you already have software on your PC that could be pressed into service for that DIY project you're thinking about. So, in addition to reviewing dedicated packages, we provide some hints and tips on how to use your existing software.

DIY should be an enjoyable and rewarding experience and one that should save you money. If you find it a chore and would prefer to be down the pub we probably can't help, but we might reduce the frustration caused by working without the necessary planning and skills. Alternatively, if you're already a dedicated DIYer, you're sure to find something here to make your pastime even more rewarding.

REVIEW DIY WEBSITE

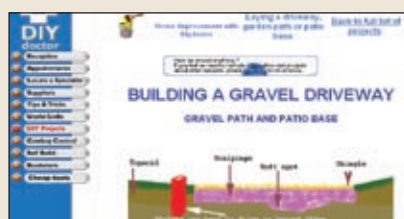
DIY Doctor

RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.diydoctor.org.uk

Despite the name of the site, DIY Doctor's purpose isn't purely to lend a helping hand when things go wrong. The main part of the site is a huge list of documents covering just about any DIY project you can imagine. These range from very specific projects, such as how to insert and maintain airbricks, to large projects such as barn conversions, although these are understandably just overviews. They also include instructions on how to prepare for your task and sorting out problems such as an airlock in a water system.

If you can't find what you're looking for, you can email the experts. However, for insurance reasons DIY Doctor won't answer questions on central heating or electrics.



For peace of mind, consult this site before you start that DIY project

REVIEW DIY WEBSITE

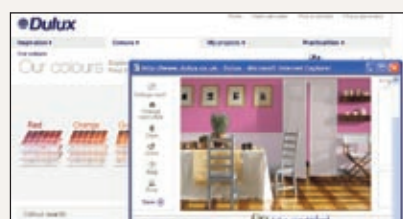
Dulux

RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.dulux.co.uk

Much of this site is as you'd expect: paint charts, decorating advice and information aimed at persuading you to buy Dulux products. However, there's also an online Paint a Room application that allows you to see how your colours will look in real life. First you choose a room type, then pick a room style that most closely resembles the one in your home, and finally you drag paint colours into different areas of the room to create the end result. When you're ready, you can order free colour swatches from Dulux.

Paint charts give a poor impression of the final look and matchpots are a hassle. This web-based approach could be the best way to visualise how your finished room will look.



Pick a room in your house and paint it in any combination of colours

REVIEW DIY WEBSITE

DIY Fix It

RATING ★★★

WEB www.diyfixit.co.uk

If the fear of things going wrong deters you from starting a DIY project, DIY Fix It might help. It includes instructions on what to do if things break or wear out or if your project doesn't work.

The information is divided into nine main areas – general building, central heating, wallpapering, insulation, carpentry, plumbing, electrics, painting and tiling – and each section has lots of topics. Many of these are concerned with repairing or replacing things or correcting errors such as putting a nail through a water pipe, but there's information on projects such as insulating a loft as well. There's also a forum where you can ask questions, although you have to register for free membership.



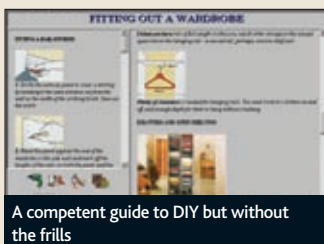
Whatever problem you've come across, DIY Fix It probably has the answer

REVIEW **DIY SOFTWARE****FOCUS**
Do It Yourself

RATING ★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Focus 01889 570156

DETAILS www.focusmm.co.uk

A competent guide to DIY but without the frills

This package aims to teach you the basic skills you'll need to give your home a facelift. The presentation is much like that of a book, with chapters on decorating, building, carpentry, storage, plumbing, electrics and power tools. Chapters vary considerably in size – the one on power tools has just three topics, while the one on building has almost 30 – and cover subjects ranging from choosing primers and sealers to fitting spotlights and downlighters. If you're planning this sort of work, though, you should bear in mind that new regulations prohibit you from doing electrical work in certain circumstances.

The similarity to a book is carried through to the content, with line drawings and photographs illustrating the text but no multimedia features such as video clips. On some pages you can view a set of step-by-step instructions, a 'trade tip', a problem solver, safety information or a shopping list, but once again, all these are items you'd expect from the printed page.

You can search for topics, set and return to bookmarks or backtrack through the list of pages you've viewed, but this is about the limit of the automation provided. The package aims to cover much the same ground as the two website tutorials here and, despite its no-frills appearance, seems much more structured and organised than the online offerings. However, it is severely limited by the fact that it is incompatible with Windows XP.

✓ A well-structured guide to those tricky jobs around the house

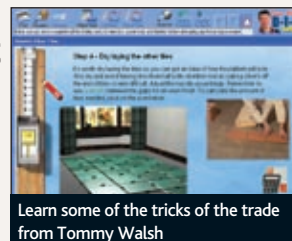
✗ Won't work with Windows NT, 2000 or XP

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/Me, 486, Pentium processor, 8MB RAM, 1MB disk space (runs from CD), 640x480 graphics

REVIEW **DIY SOFTWARE****FOCUS**
Teaching You DIY Skills with Tommy Walsh

RATING ★★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.pcworld.co.ukDETAILS www.focusmm.co.uk

Learn some of the tricks of the trade from Tommy Walsh

This program aims to do much the same as Focus's Do It Yourself (left), but there the similarity ends. Most obviously, the structure is different. Rather than dividing jobs into the type of skill required, the main sections relate to the garden, bathroom, kitchen and lounge. This means that there's a good mix in each section – bathroom tasks include bending a copper pipe and fitting a shelf, whereas for the lounge you can learn how to remove a radiator and hang a heavy picture – but it isn't always obvious where the information is stored. You might not think of looking for bricklaying in the garden section, for example, and there's no search facility. Tasks are presented using step-by-step instructions, with diagrams and photos in addition to the text, and many also include animations and video clips.

The information might be good, and the presentation is a big improvement on Do It Yourself, but Walsh doesn't reveal all his trade secrets. The emphasis is on jobs that the enthusiastic amateur might feel comfortable tackling, but there are a number of omissions. If you're particularly ambitious and want to try plastering, for example, you'll be disappointed as it's not even mentioned here. Similarly there's nothing on roofing or woodworking.

✓ Video clips make learning easier than with diagrams and photos

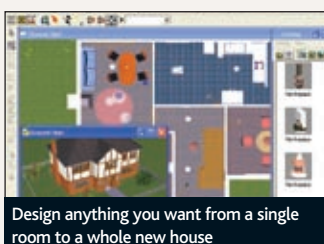
✗ Covers only a small selection of the jobs you might want to do

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 133MHz Pentium processor, 16MB RAM, 20MB disk space, 800x600 graphics

REVIEW **DIY SOFTWARE****GSP**
3D Home Designer Deluxe Edition

RATING ★★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.gsp.cc

Design anything you want from a single room to a whole new house

Despite the name, you don't have to be intent on designing a whole new home to use this package. Although it is up to the job of designing a building in its entirety, it can also be used to give a single room a makeover, and at this price you can afford to buy it for this task alone.

The basic premise is that you design your house room by room, defining the roof, doors, windows, stairs, lighting and so on and then add furniture and all the other finishing touches. You can accept defaults for each object or you can define them exactly using the many options. You can see how your creation looks in 3D at any time and there are tools to walk around the room.

Most people will use this package to get an idea of how something will look, but you can define the construction too. In specifying the roof, for example, you can get involved in all the complexity of rafters, purlins and soffits if you so wish. The manual, which is supplied as a PDF, has 363 pages, which gives you some idea of the complexity of this program. Even so, you don't have to use all the features and you can be doing something useful within a few minutes.

✓ Impressive tools at a knock-down price

✗ You can get even more if you pay slightly more

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP, 200MHz processor, 64MB RAM, 800x600 graphics

REVIEW **DIY SOFTWARE****FAST TRAK**
Punch Super Home Suite

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £13 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.fasttrak.co.uk

Design every aspect of your home with the Super Home Suite

Punch Super Home Suite is aimed at a similar audience to GSP's 3D Home Designer Deluxe (left), so if you want to give a room a facelift or if you fancy designing your own home, this package is worthy of consideration. It's a down-to-earth program with the look and feel of something a professional might use, but not nearly as complicated. Even so, if you want to become proficient, there's a lot to learn.

The overall concept is much the same as the GSP software – design in 2D and preview in 3D – but there the similarity ends. The 2D design is divided into layers that you can work on independently and view either by themselves or in any combination. Those layers are for the foundation, floor, roof, decking and landscape, plus electrics, plumbing, heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

To help you get started the package comes with plenty of sample designs, including 10 British houses supplied by Custom Homes, but unfortunately very few include the plumbing and the electrics. As with the GSP package, it will take you quite some time to master all this package has to offer, but the interface is intuitive so you can learn gradually as you go along.

✓ A lot of software for your money

✗ Don't expect to use all the features straight out of the box

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP, 486DX, Pentium processor, 8MB RAM, 220MB disk space, 640x480 graphics

REVIEW **DIY SOFTWARE**

FAST TRAK Punch Home Design Architectural Series 3000

RATING ★★☆☆

PRICE £51 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.fasttrak.co.uk

Whereas Punch Super Home Suite (page 206) is Fast Track's entry-level package, Punch Home Design Architectural Series 3000 is far more advanced. The look and feel of the two packages are the same, but Architectural Series 3000 adds many extra features.

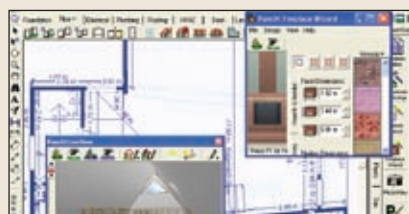
We can't do justice to it in the space available, but here's a feel for some of its advanced features. First there's plenty of scope for working with the information you already have, rather than starting from scratch. If you have a paper plan, for example, you can scan it in, and you can also import plans in AutoCAD format. There are lots of facilities for using photographs. You can include a photo of the surrounding area so you can view your home in its proper environment, or a shot of a special door or window you want to include. An animator enables you to create a movie of your completed design, and there are miscellaneous features such as a 3D CAD module for creating custom objects and a fireplace wizard.

On the downside, this package costs almost £40 more than most of the others here, so you'd need to be dedicated to justify the expense.

✓ Does just about everything concerned with house design

✗ The most expensive home design package here by a considerable margin

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 900MB disk space, 800x600 graphics



A serious package for the serious DIYer

REVIEW **DIY SOFTWARE**

SMARTDRAW SmartDraw 7 Floor Plan Edition

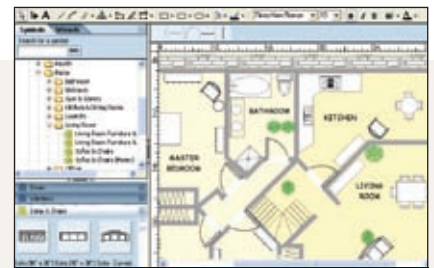
RATING ★★☆☆

PRICE £129 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.qbssoftware.comDETAILS www.smartdraw.com

SmartDraw allows the non-expert to create professional-looking drawings. So rather than laying down individual lines, rectangles, circles and text, symbols are dragged into templates and customised by resizing, repositioning and rotating them. As one of several editions of SmartDraw, the Floor Plan edition is tailored to this particular application by providing relevant templates.

SmartDraw Floor Plan Edition isn't aimed specifically at the home owner, although it certainly can be used for designing any room in the house. However, it does far more than that,



Design any type of floor plan with SmartDraw

which explains the high price. Included here are facilities for various professional uses such as offices, conference rooms, healthcare centres, events such as banquets and emergency exit route planning. The emphasis is on the purely practical, so although there are nice facilities such as automatic dimensioning, there's no 3D preview.

✓ Far more than just a bathroom and kitchen design package

✗ Costs more than most home users will want to pay

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM, 100MB disk space, 800x600 graphics

REVIEW **DIY SOFTWARE**

KITCHEN DRAW Kitchen Draw

RATING ★★☆☆

PRICE Free download (10.3MB), free for 30 hours, then €3 (around £2) per hour

SUPPLIER sales@kitchendraw.comDETAILS www.kitchendraw.com

Despite its name, you can use Kitchen Draw for bathrooms, too. When you start a new job you're prompted for the size of the working area, the colours of the carcasses, doors, worktops, types of handles and so on. After this it's simply a matter of picking objects from the vast library of kitchen or bathroom units and fittings, placing them into your design area and then fine-tuning by dragging them around and rotating them.

The method of working is intuitive, so you will be able to start very quickly. Normally you work in the 2D plan view, but you can look at your progress at any time in 3D as a wire-frame model or, if you're prepared to wait for the extra processing, as a photo-realistic image. You can even generate an animation showing your design rotating onscreen. When you've finished the



Design your new kitchen for nothing – as long as you don't take more than 30 hours

design you can generate a bill of materials and, if you're a commercial user, create various Word documents such as a quotation for your customer.

This package might be more limited in its scope than most presented here in that it allows you to work only on bathrooms and kitchens, but it is easy to use and, if you can design your new kitchen in 30 hours, it won't cost you a penny.

✓ A polished piece of software

✗ The hourly charge will soon add up after the 30-hour free period

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/Me/NT4/2000/XP, 100MHz Pentium processor, 32MB RAM, 100MB disk space, 800x600 graphics

USING YOUR EXISTING SOFTWARE

If you're happy to plan your new kitchen or bathroom on the basis of a floor plan, you could use a drawing package such as CorelDraw. You might find that it comes with libraries of useful symbols such as baths, sinks and WCs; if not, it shouldn't be too hard to create your own.

Another potentially useful type of program that comes with virtually all digital cameras is a photo-manipulation package. You can use this to visualise how a room will look in a particular

colour. First take a photograph of the room you want to decorate. Next scan in a colour chart so that you have an accurate representation of the paint colours available to you. Now load your photograph and try painting the walls in a different colour using the package's flood fill tool. Remember, though, that colours look different when they're in partial shadow, so you'll have to darken the colour of any walls not in direct sunlight.

If you're a keen gardener and you own landscape design software, remember that some packages provide facilities for home design (see our review of gardening software in *Labs*, *Shopper* October 2005). In fact, one package that gained a poor rating – Punch Master Landscape Pro – failed to impress us only because its additional features were all concerned with home design. If you're interested in both areas, it's excellent value for money. **CS**